

Then There Were Nine

The white United Nations station wagon headed south on the coastal highway from the Lebanese town of Tyre. Suddenly, near the village of Ras el-Ein, a brown Volvo blocked the road. Gunmen leaped from the car and dragged out the station wagon's lone passenger: U.S. Marine Lieut. Colonel William Higgins, 43, the leader of a 76-man observer group attached to the U.N. Interim Force. The attackers forced him into the Volvo and sped off. That abduction last week brought to nine the number of American hostages in Lebanon.

Two days later the so-called Organization of the Oppressed on Earth delivered to a Western news agency a statement typed in Arabic declaring its responsibility for the abduction. En-

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closed were snapshots of two of Higgins' identity cards. The statement read: "We have caught the throat of the American serpent, criminal agent of the satanic CIA and one of the biggest spies, sowing daily terror in our land." Mindful that an earlier hostage, CIA Station Chief William Buckley, had been tortured to death by his abductors, the State Department denied any links between the kidnaped colonel and the U.S. intelligence services.

At the time of his capture Higgins, a native of Kentucky and a former aide to ex-U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, was returning from a meeting with a local leader of the Shi'ite Amal militia. The incident was a major embarrassment for Amal Leader Nabih Berri, Lebanon's Justice Minister. Amal, along with U.N. peacekeeping forces, immediately launched a manhunt for Higgins and his abductors.



Higgins on U.N. duty last November

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